

A Mark of the Shepherd: The Narrative Function of σπλαγχνίζομαι in Matthew's Story of Jesus

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Abstract

This narrative study of Matthew's use of σπλαγχνίζομαι shows that the term functions as an attribute identifying Jesus as Israel's promised Davidic Shepherd. It begins with a swift survey of the occurrences of the word in the Synoptic Gospels. Engaging in a narrative reading of the Gospel of Matthew, it then analyzes the five instances of the word's appearance (9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34) highlighting the narrative dynamics in its given context.

Among the most endearing images of Jesus in the Gospels is that of him blessing the little children (Matt 19:13-15). His tenderness strikes out all the more when contrasted to the stern attitude of the disciples whom he rebukes. Surprisingly this moment of benevolence is not labeled explicitly as a scene of Jesus' "compas-

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sion". Similarly in the two instances when the First Gospel quotes Hos 6:6: "Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice" (Matt 9:13; 12:7), the events are not described with σπλαγχνίζομαι but result rather in controversy. Instead the verb σπλαγχνίζομαι, loosely translated as *to be moved with pity or compassion*, is found sparingly in Matthew's Gospel occurring a mere five times (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34). Despite this, the term seems to mark significant moments in Jesus' ministry and reveals his inner spirit. This article seeks to disclose the narrative function of σπλαγχνίζομαι in Matthew's story of Jesus and, ultimately, reveal a key characterization.

Jesus' compassion in the Synoptics

A quick survey of the occurrences of σπλαγχνίζομαι shows that, among the Gospels, it is found only in the Synoptics. However, unlike Luke, Matthew uses the verb alone and does not, even once, utilize the noun σπλάγχνον (cf. Luke 1:78; also Acts 1:18). Matthew's story is consistently focused on compassion as an attribute of Jesus and not merely as a description. Since the three instances of σπλαγχνίζομαι are in Luke's special material (7:13; 10:33; 15:20), these have no influence on Matthew's use of the term.

Instead, Matthew shares a closer bond with Mark's Gospel. In fact, Mark 6:34 is almost certainly the source for two instances when Matthew's narrator reveals Jesus' compassionate spirit (Matt 9:36; 14:14).¹ Similarly, Mark 8:2 is repeated quasi-verbatim in Matt 15:32. Despite these similarities, what strikes out is Matthew's disuse of the characterization in two passages with Markan parallels (Matt 8:3 // Mark 1:41; Matt 17:15 // Mark 9:22). Matthew's selective use of σπλαγχνίζομαι hints of a narrative strategy similar to yet distinctively different from Mark.

¹ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 130; John R. Donahue – Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina Series 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) 205; Camille Focant, *L'évangile selon Marc* (Commentaire biblique. Nouveau Testament 2; Paris: Cerf, 2004) 247-248.

Preliminaries to Matthew's depiction of Jesus' compassion

Two things strike the implied reader² who embarks on the narrative journey in search of Matthew's use of σπλαγχνίζομαι. Firstly, characters – mainly leaders – are presented as hard hearted, if not as out rightly cruel. Herod's anxiety at the news of a new-born king is such as to make entire Jerusalem tremble (Matt 2:3). It is not lost on the implied reader that "King" Herod quickly loses his title (2:1.3; cf. vv. 7.12.13.15.16.19.22) to the little child whose task is "to shepherd my people Israel" (v. 4) and whom Herod soon after seeks to destroy. The deceit (2:8), fury (v. 16) and cruelty of Herod only bring death and lamentation which are in contrast to the joy (2:10) and salvation the little child ushers in (1:21). Similarly, the implied reader notes the unflattering portrayal of the Pharisees in their very first encounter with Jesus in Matthew's story (9:10-13). Just earlier, some scribes – almost certainly Pharisees – were more concerned about the minutiae of the Law rather than the welfare of the paralytic (9:3). Now, Jesus' table fellowship with those publicly regarded as sinners draw the religious leaders' ire. This incites Jesus' rebuke with the lecture from Hosea "Go and learn the meaning of the words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice" (Matt 9:13; cf. Hos 6:6). Even Jesus' liberation of the dumb man from his demons could provoke from the Pharisees only an unjust – and grossly mistaken – accusation (Matt 9:34). By contrast, Jesus preaches mercy (5:7) and the heavenly Father's magnanimous providence (6:25ff). Moreover, Jesus "walks his talk" as he makes the rounds of the whole of Galilee curing illnesses (4:23; 9:35) evoking the fulfillment of Isaiah's messianic prophecy (Isa 53:4; Matt 8:17) identifying him as the eschatological shepherd who gathers Israel's lost sheep (cf. 15:24). It is Jesus, not Israel's political or religious leaders, who is depicted preaching mercy and enacting merciful deeds.

² The implied reader is a literary construct designating the addressee of the implied author. It is distinct from the real life, flesh-and-blood *actual* reader of the text. The implied reader is the counterpart of the implied author – the latter being defined by the narrative's overall textual strategy; see Meyer H. Abrams – Geoffrey G. Harpam, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2005⁸) 266; Seymour B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y./London: Cornell University, 1978) 149-151.

Equally surprising is the fact that despite this consistent and sustained portrayal of Jesus' alleviation of human suffering (8:1-9:34), his individual acts are not characterized with σπλαγχνίζομαι. Its omission in 8:3 (cf. Mark 1:41) is especially disconcerting considering that this is Matthew's first miracle narrative (8:1-4; cf. 4:23-24). What better way to imprint Jesus' compassionate character than on this first miraculous deed? Similarly, the term is not found even in episodes where characters cry out to Jesus for mercy (ἐλεέω; 9:27) and healing (8:2.6; 9:18.20.32). Instead, a study of Matthew's redaction of Mark shows that the First Evangelist omits σπλαγχνίζομαι when the beneficiaries are individual persons (cf. also Matt 17:15 // Mark 9:22). Matthew's narrator instead reserves the verb for a very specific target audience (9:36; 14:14; 15:32).

Jesus' effective compassion (Matt 9:36)

Matt 9:36: *"And when he saw the crowds he was moved with compassion for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd."*

The first occurrence of the verb σπλαγχνίζομαι in Matthew's story is in a key connective text (9:35-38). Matt 9:35 recalls Jesus' earlier pastoral zeal recorded in 4:23 and together with the latter forms an inclusion of Jesus' early Galilean ministry of teaching, preaching "the good news of the kingdom" and healing "all kinds of disease and illness" (4:23; 9:35). This framing alerts the implied reader to interpret what follows in the light of all that had gone before right from the very start of Jesus' pastoral activity (4:12-17). By linking 9:35 to 4:23, the narrator suggests that the reference to Jesus' compassion in 9:36 be read in the context of his ministry of proclamation (chap. 4), teaching (chaps. 5-7) and, especially, healing the sick and liberating the oppressed (chaps. 8-9).

Jesus' compassion is triggered by his extraordinary capacity for perception (ἰδών [seeing] in 9:36). Since the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is portrayed with an acute awareness of those who seek him like the crowds (5:1; 8:18), the paralytic (9:2) and the woman suffering from hemorrhage (9:22). While ἰδών may refer simply to the sense of sight (5:1; 8:18; 9:23; 21:19), at other times it indicates an inner perception revealing the narrator's omniscience (9:4). In Matt 9:36, the function of ἰδών progresses from external

sight of the crowds to the narrator's omniscient interpretation of Jesus' mind. It marks a change in focalization and draws the implied reader to view the crowds with the eyes of Jesus and to concur with the evaluation of their desperate state. It aligns the implied reader with the narrator's verdict ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (9:36) and to agree that Jesus *was profoundly moved with compassion*.

Significantly, while perception is also attributed to Herod (2:16), Judas (27:3) and Pilate (v. 24), these individuals act upon it in malevolent ways. Jesus alone perceives and brings about good works (cf. 5:16).

The object of Jesus' compassion is a group – the crowds (9:36). These are the mass of people whom he encounters in his mission to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (15:24; cf. 10:5). They follow him "from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and Transjordan" (4:25). They are predominantly Jews, even though at times his benevolence extends even to Gentiles (8:5.28). Although they hear his teaching (5:1; 7:28), they do not immediately come to faith (cf. 8:10; 9:2.22). These crowds are attracted to him (4:25; 8:1.18) and are impressed (7:28) but are often left only amazed (9:8.33) and even show misunderstanding (9:23.25). They are those whom Jesus seeks out (9:35) and try to win over.

The description of the crowd's desperate state – *because they were harassed and dejected* (9:36b) – is not merely the narrator's evaluation. The causal particle ο[τι (because) indicates the narrator's omniscience who perceives and reveals the very mind-set of Jesus. It is Jesus' own mental process which the narrator verbalizes. The hendiadys which describes the crowd's forlorn state is wretchedly graphic and depicts their intense distress in their abandonment. With Jesus' benevolent activity (chaps. 8-9) still fresh on its mind, the implied reader readily accepts this depiction and associates the hapless crowd with those whose illnesses the foretold Messiah alleviates (8:17; cf. Isa 53:4).

The simile which concludes this verse – *like sheep without a shepherd* (9:36c) – is the omniscient narrator's infallible evaluation. It reflects Old Testament (= OT) language describing Israel's desperate situation as a people without adequate leadership (Num 27:17; 1 Kgs 22:17 [= 2 Chr 18:16]; Jdt 11:19;). More frequently this state is brought about by the failure and neglect of Israel's

leaders giving this imagery a heightened negative nuance (Jer 23: 1.2; 50:6; Ezek 34:5; Zech 10:2). This leads the implied reader to ask: Can the neglectful leaders of 9:36 be identified? On one hand, the implied reader remembers the faulty descriptions for Israel's unsatisfactory political (chap. 2) and religious leaders (3:7-12; 9: 3.11.). On the other hand, it is Jesus and not these missing leaders who shows himself to be truly "shepherd" of the people. It is Jesus who is profoundly moved by their plight and takes action. Compassion, therefore, aligns Jesus with the OT attribute *hesed* or faithful covenantal love which marked Yhwh's rapport with his people Israel and which spurred Yhwh to promise an eschatological Davidic Messiah (Ezek 34:23). Jesus' compassion identifies him to be that Messiah.³

Jesus' compassion is no mere sentiment but is effective. It compels him to respond promptly (10:1ff) to his own command to prayer (9:38) by establishing the Twelve from among his disciples and sending them on a mission which was his very own – to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (10:5; cf. 15:24). Surreptitiously, the imagery has changed from the pastoral (sheep, shepherd in 9: 36c) to the agricultural (ἐργάτης or worker in vv. 37-38). This enables the narrator to reserve the imagery of shepherd for Jesus alone just as he is the unique Son and revealer (12:27) and only Teacher (23:10). More importantly, it describes with precision the role and task of the disciples who are to act on Jesus' words (7:24). In this Gospel, the Twelve and their mission are the direct result of Jesus' compassionate response to the crowd's desperate state.

Increasing opposition to Jesus

This picture of a compassionate Messiah is such a far cry from the Baptist's previous expectation (3:12), John simply had to ask: "Are you the one who is to come" (11:3)? In answer, Jesus refers to his earlier ministry and proclaims blessed those who do not find him as a stumbling block (11:6). Remarkably, this messianic

³ Helmut Köster, «σπλάγγνον, σπλαγγνίζομαι», *TDNT*, VII, 554-555; Young S. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd. Studies in Old Testament, Second Temple Judaism and in the Gospel of Matthew* (WUNT II/216; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 200.

feature of being “gentle and humble of heart” (11:29; cf. Zech 9:9) is presented as distinct from Jesus’ being compassionate. Meekness is associated in one’s rapport with Jesus. Compassion is Jesus’ outwardly-directed expression toward the crowds.

Unlike the Baptist, the Pharisees increasingly find issues against Jesus. They contend against his leniency towards his hungry disciples (12:2) which draws Jesus’ repetition of a previous rebuke: “Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice” (12:7; cf. Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13). Similarly, while the Pharisees dispute doing good works on the Sabbath, Jesus unhesitatingly restores a man to health (12:13). Once more the narrator continues to portray Jesus as Yhwh’s servant (12:18-21) and expected Davidic Messiah (v. 23). Instead, the Pharisees – who have shown no mercy – brand him with the devils (v. 24) and the implied reader is forced to take sides.

The narrator continues to portray dreadful political leaders. Herod the Great tried to kill the little child in Bethlehem. Now another Herod succeeds in beheading its “messenger” (14:9; cf. 11:10). The narrator first describes this Herod’s direct hand in John’s imprisonment before he reveals the unjustified reason (14:3b). This heightens Antipas’ cruel role and guilt. His evil intention (he had wanted to kill him) is delayed only because of his weak character (he was afraid of the people; 14:5). But Herod’s offense is not only against John. He neglects to protect the honor of the daughter of Herodias⁴ and shows himself as out rightly dishonorable. His whimsical promise, alluding to powers reserved for God alone (14:7; cf. 6:34; 7:7.11), is affirmed by unlawful swearing (cf. 5:34) and is an example of the unproductive word (11:36). Although the scheme to have John beheaded was contrived by the girl’s mother, it is Herod alone who commands and is ultimately respon-

⁴ Public meals were traditionally considered male events and women who attended these were commonly understood to provide sex whether they did so or not; see Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women. Public Meals. Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 1993) 25-27; Warren C. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins. A Socio-Political and Religious Reading* (JSNTSS 204; Sheffield, Academic Press, 2000) 303. The presence of Herodias’ daughter as an indecent spectacle reflected on Herod’s shameless character; see William D. Davies – Dale .C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) II, 472.

sible. Having failed to show honor to a girl, he who is king is ordered about and dishonored even more.⁵ His distress is hypocritical (13:15) and his banquet brings about only death. Depicted as whimsical, cruel and cowardly, Herod is the epitome of an immoral ruler who stands in contrast to Jesus who is wise and compassionate and who, as the succeeding episodes will show, is a shepherd-like leader who provides nourishment and defends.

Continuing compassion for the crowds (14:14)

Matt 14:14: *“So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he was moved with pity for them and healed their sick.”*

Reacting to growing opposition, Jesus once more withdraws (14:13; cf. 4:12; 12:15; 15:21). His retreat however does not only imply escape. More importantly it signifies an ever frequent and increasing distancing from Israel and her leaders. At its start the second reference to the compassion of Jesus does not strike out as unusual. Like the first, it is triggered by his visual experience of the crowd and the awareness of their need. As formerly, his compassion is directed in a personal way – upon them (ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς in 14:14). Once again, the object of his compassion is the group οἱ ὄχλοι, i.e. the crowds (vv. 13.14) and his disposition towards them is effective – he cures them. Finally, once more this insight is revealed by the inerrant, omniscient narrator.

Slight variations however capture the implied reader’s attention and suggest further meaning. The size of the crowd (14:14) indicates an important event is soon to happen (cf. 4:25; 8:1; 13:2; 15:30; 19:2; 20:29; 26:47). The verb used for Jesus’ act of healing (θεραπεύω) affirms the Jewish ethnicity of the multitude and underlines his deed as messianic (14:14; cf. 8:16.17).⁶

⁵ Her request is in the imperative «δός μοι» in adamant terms (ὧδε; 14,8) devoid of any sign of respect.

⁶ In the Matthew’s story, Jesus alone heals. Frequently the verb used is θεραπεύω (4:23.24; 8:7.16; 9:35; 10:1.8; 12:10.15.22; 14:14; 15:30; 17:16.18; 19:2; 21:14). Invariably, in these cases, the beneficiaries are Jews. Instead, when the one cured is a Gentile, the verb ἰάομαι is found as in the case of the centurion’s son (8:8.13) and the Canaanite woman’s daughter (15:28).

The disciples' assessment regarding the remoteness of the place (14:15) reflects the narrator's depiction (v. 13) and evokes the seclusion of the wilderness where Yhwh fed his people Israel (Exod 16:15). Their request to send the crowds away (ἀπόλυσον τους ὄχλους in v. 15) is in direct opposition to Jesus' mission to seek Israel's lost sheep (τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ in 15:24). If earlier, Jesus' compassion brought him to select the Twelve and engage them in his mission, now his profound tenderheartedness compels him to provide the Jewish crowd with nourishment. The significance of this event is not lost on the implied reader. The attentive selection of verbs depicting Jesus' actions (14:19) and the careful treatment of the leftovers point to a future meal (26:26-29) and its Eucharistic connection.⁷ The Davidic messianic Shepherd was expected to pasture Israel (Ezek 34:23). Compelled by compassion, Jesus takes upon himself this role. This miraculous nourishment of the crowds also serves as a filter to interpret the present Christian Eucharist as arising from Jesus' benevolent heart.

Compassion even for the Gentiles

Matthew's story continues with the disciples' extraordinary experience of Jesus' dominion over the waters. Although they even-

⁷ Leopold Sabourin, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (2 vols.: Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1982) II, 642. This episode alludes to other meal settings with which it shares many details: the Last Supper (Matt 26:26-29) and the Eucharist. The evening setting of the multiplication of loaves (14:15) associates it with the later Passover meal (26:20). The narrator's choice and ordering of verbs to describe Jesus' action in both scenes indicates a parallelism. This also explains the focus of Jesus' action only on the bread (v. 19) glossing over the fact that both bread and fish were given to him (v. 18). Finally, the abundance of the meal and its satisfying effect (ἐχορτάσθησαν), the care with which leftovers were gathered, the number of containers and the inclusion of to those who had benefited heightens the Eucharistic significance of the event as well as alludes to the meal's eschatological overtones (2 Apoc. Bar 29:1-8); see Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995) 419; Abraham M. Antony, "Jesus the Shepherd in the Gospel of Matthew," in Paul Vadakumpadan – Jose Varickasseril, ed., *Shepherding. Essays in Honour of Pope John Paul II* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 2005) 153-154. The Messiah was expected to prepare a banquet where all peoples will be satisfied (Isa 25:6; Jer 31:14; Ps 22:27); see Leopold Sabourin, *St. Matthew*, II, 642.

tually proclaim him “Son of God” (14:33), still they are previously rebuked to cast away fear while Peter is labeled ὀλιγόπιστος, i.e. one of little faith. Continuing controversy with the Pharisees regarding purity laws (15:10ff) prepare for the watershed encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. This woman boldly (and inappropriately) approaches Jesus in a public setting and brashly – and mistakenly – claims the rights of Israel, as implied in her address of Jesus as “Son of David” (15:22; cf. 9:27; 12:23; 20:31. 32; 21:9.15). Jesus sets aright the order of salvation in publicly expressing his personal mission “only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel”. The woman adopts Jesus’ point of view and he, in turn, recognizes her “great faith” – made even more extraordinary by his own disciples’ lack of it – which anchors her and her daughter firmly with the scope of Jesus’ saving activity.⁸

Feeding the crowd for the journey (15:32)

Matt 15:32: *“But Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I feel sorry for all these people; they have been with me for three days now and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them off hungry, or they might collapse on the way.’”*

At first sight the narrative of the second multiplication of loaves and fish (15:32-39) seems a mere duplication of the first. Unlike in Mark 8:1-10, the large crowd continues to be Jews, a

⁸ It may be too much to assert that Jesus «moves from a limited understanding of himself as prophet and teacher only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Now his mission is to the world»; *pace* Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children. Neglected Stories from the Bible* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) 131-132. Even earlier Jesus was not adverse to be benevolent to Gentiles (cf. Matt 8:7.13. 32). Moreover, even after this incident with the Canaanite woman Jesus continues to minister primarily to Israel. In *praxis* not much has changed. It is important to stress that *both* Jesus *and* the woman evolve in this episode. The woman approaches Jesus claiming the prerogatives of Israel. Instead, her desire is granted only when she manifests sufficient faith to see her place in God’s greater design. Likewise, Jesus’ point of view changes from treating her according to conventional gentilic-based norms to one founded on faith. This woman’s faith *in him* enables him to realize how he as Shepherd of Israel is for all nations as well; see John A. Cabrido, “The Shepherd of Israel for All Nations. A Portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: a Narrative-Critical and Theological Study,” (S.T.D. diss., Pontifical Gregorian University, 2008) 186.

fact affirmed by the verb used for healing (θεραπεύω in Matt 15:30) as well as their invocation of the "God of Israel".⁹ The meaningful actions of Jesus over the bread (v. 36) as well as the consequent result and narrator's comment closely follow the pattern of the first miracle.

Still there are noteworthy differences, the most important being its mountain setting (15:31). Mountains play a significant role in Matthew's story (4:8; 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 21:1; 26:30; 28:16).¹⁰ Apart from parallel Synoptic narratives, both the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:28) and the Final Commissioning (28:16-20) occur on mountains. Up to this instance, Jesus ascends mountains to contend with Satan (4:8), to teach (5:1) and to pray (14:23). Now, this mountain gathering of the crippled, the blind, the lame and the deaf and dumb – i.e. those expected to benefit from the Messiah's coming (Isa 26:19; 29:18ff; 35:5ff) – together with a large anonymous assembly (ἐτέρους πολλοῦ in Matt 15:30) lends to this episode an eschatological character. They are not just hungry but are in need of strengthening for the journey (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ in 15:22). This bountiful feeding of the multitudes on the mountain evokes Yhwh's divine banquet (Isa 25:6-8) and fulfills the promise of pasturing on Israel's mountains (Ezek 34:13), further identifying Jesus as Yhwh's appointed Shepherd.¹¹

⁹ J.R.C. Cousland, "The Feeding of the Four Thousand: Gentiles in Matthew? Matthew 15,29-39 as a Test Case," *NovT* 41 (1999) 23; Elisa Estévez, "Significado de ΣΠΛΑΙΧΝΙΖΟΜΑΙ en el NT," *EstBib* 48 (1990) 537-538.

¹⁰ David D. Kupp, *Matthew's Emmanuel. Divine Presence and God's People in the First Gospel* (SNTSMS 90; Cambridge: University Press, 1996) 103; Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain. A Study in Matthean Theology* (JSNTSS 8; Sheffield 1985) 175; John A. Cabrido, «Shepherd of Israel for All Nations», 357.

¹¹ This location is symbolic and evocative of the mountain where the gathered sheep of Israel are to be fed (Jer 31:10-14; Ezek 34:14.26-27); see J.R.C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew* (NovTSupp 102; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 121. T.L. Donaldson correctly notes that this scene evokes Zion eschatological traditions. The presence of the afflicted is a common feature of Zion expectations (Isa 35:5-6; Jer 31:8; Mic 4:6-7). The healing Jesus brings is «the sign and pledge of the breaking in of the messianic age»; see Joachim Jeremias, *Jesu Verheissung für die Völker* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956); English trans., *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (tr. S.H. Hooke; London: S.C.M. Press, 1958) 28. The feasting on the mountain is a proof to the nations of Yhwh's vindication of Israel (Isa 25:6-10c;

Unsurprisingly, this feeding – as previously in 14:14 – is the result of Jesus' compassion. Only now, it is directly so (15:32). Moreover in the present case, Jesus himself expresses explicitly his profound compassion in direct discourse. This no longer simply divulged by the omniscient narrator but is expressed in a statement of self-awareness – σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον (15:32). Furthermore, it is the only occurrence of this verb in the present tense, additionally implying it to be a characteristic attribute.¹² As previously, his compassion is elicited by the people's pitiful condition and is explicitly directed to them. Earlier the hendiadys “ἐσκυλμένοι καὶ ἐρριμμένοι” (lit. flayed and thrown away) described their utter dejection (9:36). Now the same verb ῥίπτω is used to depict their pitiful state (15:30). It indicates their exhausted state (Zech 10:2c) since those they looked upon as leaders provided no healing (Ezek 34:4.16). This narrative block (11:1-16:20) had begun with John the Baptist inquiry whether he was the Messiah. It ends with Jesus showing himself as the compassionate, therapeutic Son of David and the eschatological Shepherd of Israel.

Jesus' itinerant ministry has underlined the motif of traveling in Matthew's story. Soon his resolution to go to Jerusalem will endow the phrase ἐν τῇ ὁδῳ / | (on the way) with greater meaning (20:17; 21:8).

Mercy, not compassion

In Matthew's story, Peter's profession of faith (16:16) serves almost as an anti-climax coming after the disciples' communal confession in 14:33 (cf. Mark 8:29). However it retains its value as a narrative crux after which succeeding events focus on the journey towards Jerusalem. These final chapters before arrival at the Holy City contain the two remaining occurrences of

Jer 31:12-14). The gathering of the scattered sheep is a testimony of the new age (Isa 2:2-4; 35:8-10; Mic 4:1-4; Jer 31:10-14; Ezek 34:14.26f); see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*, 129-130.

¹² The verb in the present tense can have a durative aspect connoting a timeless act; see Friedrich Blass – Albert. Debrunner – Robert.W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago/London: Cambridge University Press, 1961) §318, 167.

σπλαγχνίζομαι (18:27; 20:34). Both are remarkably different in orientation and in context from the previous instances and challenge the implied reader to discern their meaning.

The Transfiguration stands as the first significant episode immediately after Peter's confession and is quickly followed by exorcism of the young paralytic. Surprisingly the narrator excises referral to Jesus' compassion (cf. Mark 9:22) and instead substitutes this with a plea for mercy (ἐλέησόν in Matt 17:15). The implied reader remembers a similar omission in the narrative of the leper (Matt 8:3; cf. Mark 1:41) and arrives at the same conclusion. In Matthew mercy, generally, is dispensed to individuals (9:27; 15:22; 17:15). Instead compassion is a messianic attribute reserved for Israel (9:36; 14:14; 15:32).

Compassion as an attribute of the heavenly Father (18:27)

Matt 18:27: *"And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt."*

The fourth occurrence of σπλαγχνίζομαι is in the uniquely Matthean parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35). Jesus narrates the parable to illustrate his teaching on unbounded forgiveness. Concerning compassion, the parable is striking on two counts. Firstly, it is the only instance where the quality is attributed to someone else other than Jesus. As proper of parables, the royal ruler is kept anonymous and is referred to in Matthew's periphrastic manner (ἄνθρωπῳ βασιλεῖ in 18:23; cf. 13:24.43.52; 20:1; 21:33; 22:2; 25:14). More frequently, he is labeled as "lord" (κύριος) underscoring his superior status (18:27.31.32.34). The parable makes clear his omnipotence in dispensing judgment (vv. 27.34) and the implied reader readily accepts Jesus' analogy when this character is associated with the heavenly Father (v. 35). Thus, for the only time in Matthew's story, σπλαγχνίζομαι is identified as a divine attribute (18:27).

A second striking feature is the number of verbs resembling σπλαγχνίζομαι which in turn helps to define it – μακροθυμέω (to be patient: 18:26.29), ἀφίημι (to forgive: vv. 27.32.35) and ἐλεέω (to have mercy: v.33[2x]). The plea for patience appears in the appeal of the two apprehended servants. While the entreaty of the second

may be justified, the preposterously enormous amount owed by the first makes any appeal for clemency ludicrous. This characterizes the master's consequent compassion as both extreme and irrational as evidenced by his immediate and total pardon. Both servants could hope only for time. The first was rewarded far beyond what he could even have hoped for. Next, the parable presents forgiveness as a direct result of compassion (18:27.32) and as a line of action expected of every disciple (v. 35). Compassion forms the animating force. Forgiveness is its concrete expression. Finally, mercy is the human approximation to the divine attribute of compassion (v. 33). It is the beatitude required of disciples (5,7). It is the magnanimity of undeserved love for which humans aspire (9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30.31) and which Jesus prioritizes among the weightier matters of the law (9:13; 12:7; 23:23). In summary, then, to be merciful is human; to be compassionate is divine.

On the road to Jerusalem

A decisive moment in Jesus' ministry begins as he finally leaves Galilee on his way to Jerusalem (19:1). Two early events – both involving young people – could have been prime moments for Jesus to have shown compassion (Matt 19:13-15.16-22), especially considering Mark's heavily emotional narrative (cf. Mark 10:13-16.17-22). Instead, Matthew's narrator omits usage of *σπλαγχνίζομαι* in both cases. It also leaves out details which color Mark's version with greater human warmth. Thus, in Matthew, Jesus blesses the little children but does not embrace them (Matt 19:15; cf. Mark 10:16). Similarly, Matthew's narrator makes no mention of Jesus' steady look of love for the youth who had observed all the commandments. By excluding traces of emotion, the narrator manifests its preference to minimize sentiment. Correspondingly, compassion – when presented – refers to a quality, characteristic or attribute rather than an emotion or sentiment.

For a third time and with greater detail, Jesus proclaims his approaching passion (20:17-19; cf. 16:21; 17:22-23). Despite this, his disciples fail to perceive and continue to misunderstand. Their indignation with the Zebedee brothers (20:24) are a sign of their blindness and brings about Jesus to teach them about his example of service and life as a ransom for others (v. 28).

Vision for the Journey (20:34)

Matt 20:34: *“Jesus was moved with pity for them and touched their eyes, and at once their sight returned and they followed him.”*

The final appearance of σπλαγχνίζομαι in Matthew’s story is in the key episode of the cure of the two blind men (20:29-34). This is also the last miracle story before Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. The attribution of compassion to Jesus by the narrator is no longer surprising (v. 34; cf. 9:36; 14:14) except that it is the result of Matthew’s redaction (cf. Mark 10:34). What truly surprises is that Jesus’ compassion is stirred not by the large crowd which is present (Matt 20:29) but by two individuals. This fact seems to go against Matthew’s norm (cf. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32) and challenges the implied reader to grapple for meaning.

Previous cries for mercy (ἐλέησον) were encountered by Jesus (9:27; 15:22; 17:15) and the supplicants’ requests were granted. However, in those instances there was no reference to his compassion. The two blind men’s appeal to Jesus as “Son of David” recalls an earlier narrative (9:27-31) and evokes the memory of the entire block of miracle stories (chaps. 8-9) where Jesus’ ministry of healing identifies him as the therapeutic Davidic messiah and Shepherd of Israel. This permits the association of compassion to the current narrative but does not fully justify its presence.

The key to understanding may be in the analysis of context and setting. Matthew’s story puts particular emphasis on the eye (ὀφθαλμός in 5:29; 7:3.5; 13,15.16; 17:8), the sense of sight (6:22.23; 9:29.30) and the act of seeing (5:29.38; 6:22; 7:4). It contains numerous sayings involving the eye (5:29.38; 6:22; 7:4), many of which are with metaphorical meaning (e.g. 20:15; 26:43). Jesus’ question to the blind men “What do you want (τί θέλετε) me to do for you?” (20:32) recalls his earlier question to the mother of James and John “What is it you want (τί θέλεις)?” (v. 21) and his own warnings to his disciples of what they desire (θέλη| in vv. 26.27). By this association, the narrator alludes to the disciples’ own lack of perception and implies that the blind men’s cure goes beyond mere physical vision. This may explain the strange use of ὄμμα (eye) – a term found only here (v. 34) – as well as the more explicit statement of sight (ἀνέβλεψαν in v. 34) which is absent from the earlier

narrative (cf. 9:30). Both serve to underscore the bestowal of vision which Jesus grants.

Spatial setting clarifies the importance of the event which takes place. The narrative begins with the blind men's state of inaction along the roadside (ὁδός in 20:30). It is the same road going up to Jerusalem on which Jesus predicted his impending passion (v. 17). In fact, once their sight is restored the two blind men follow Jesus to Jerusalem (v. 34). They epitomize the true disciple who is ready "to take up his cross" and follow the Lord (16:24-25). Jesus' compassion, therefore, does not only bestow them with sight. It empowers them to be true disciples who follow him along the way.

Beyond Compassion

Arrival in Jerusalem signals the final stage in Jesus' ministry. It also marks the end of any reference to his compassion. Although he will continue to work miracles in the Temple area (21:15) it will be his suffering as the stricken Shepherd (26:31) and – as resurrected Lord – his gathering of the scattered disciples (28:16-20) that identifies him with messianic prophecies (Zech 13:7; Ezek 34:12; Mic 2:12). Ultimately, it is Jesus' passion to do the Father's will (26:39.42.44) which leads him to a sacrifice of self "for the ransom of many" (20:28).

Σπλαγχνίζομαι in Matthew's Story of Jesus

Two quick observations can be drawn from the above study. Firstly, in Matthew's narrative, the term σπλαγχνίζομαι is reserved almost exclusively for Jesus. Among Matthew's characters on the primary narrative level, Jesus alone is characterized as compassionate. In the single instance when this quality is used of another individual (18:27), it is for a character in an embedded parable whose attribute helps to elucidate Jesus' own. Secondly, the term is found only during Jesus' ministry and is limited to the time before his arrival in Jerusalem. Compassion, therefore, is associated with his ministry in Galilee and on the road towards Jerusalem. Instead, the orientation of his final week in the Jerusalem is another matter.

Having said this, the quality referred to by σπλαγχνίζομαι is not an emotion or sentiment. Jesus' compassion is an attribute which is dynamic and effective. It is not simply a static quality or mere characteristic. The compassion of Jesus identifies him to be Yhwh's Messiah whose tenderheartedness he reflects. It is rooted in his intimate relationship to Yhwh even if it is elicited from him by the sad plight of Israel's crowds. Compassion distinguishes Jesus from Israel's political and religious leadership and marks him as Israel's true Shepherd. The compassion of Jesus is effective spurring him to liberate his people from radical oppression – not only from illness and disease – but from their very source. Compassion is the transformative power which incites him to choose the Twelve and to commission them on a mission along the lines of his very own (10:6; cf. 15:24). It moves him twice to bring nourishment to the crowds in miracles the early church associated with the Eucharistic celebration. Jesus' compassion brings him to enable the blind men to perceive his identity as the suffering messiah and to empower them to follow him as models of true discipleship.

Narrative function of σπλαγχνίζομαι in the Matthew's Gospel

Although the term σπλαγχνίζομαι occurs only five times in the First Gospel, the implied author's use is judicious and calculated. The verb makes its first appearance only in 9:36. This allows the implied author to develop the context for the usage of the term. Already in 2:6, the infant king is identified by prophecy as "a leader who will shepherd my people". Then characters – namely, Herod and later the scribes and Pharisees – are introduced who serve as foils against whom the compassionate character of Jesus can be contrasted. Finally, a whole cycle of miraculous deeds in response to cries of mercy are narrated. These prepare the implied reader to readily accept the narrator's evaluation in 9:36 – *he was moved by compassion*. By then, the implied reader fills the void left by Israel's negligent leaders and identifies Jesus as the Shepherd according to the heart of Yhwh. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Jesus' compassion is stirred – at the start – uniquely by the crowds who are predominantly Jews and, especially in 15:32 – as gathered and fed on the mountain – clearly as the messianic audience. While continuing the caricature of false leadership by political and religious figures, the implied author

twice associates Jesus' compassion with the feeding of Israel's crowds (14:20; 15:37) which evokes prophetic oracles describing Israel's eschatological Shepherd (Ezek 34:23). Clearly the implied author uses the attribute of compassion to identify Jesus as Israel's Messiah and Davidic Shepherd.

The usage of σπλαγχνίζομαι in the parable (18:27) serves ultimately to establish the archetype for Jesus' compassion – the Father himself, whom the just king represents. This implies that the compassion of Jesus, although elicited by the crowds, is actually founded on his intimate relationship and likeness to the Father. Finally, σπλαγχνίζομαι serves to link Jesus' ministry to his passion and his continuing presence among his disciples. Although located only in the narratives of ministry prior to Jerusalem, the compassion of Jesus enables the blind men to perceive him correctly and, transformed as models of true discipleship, to follow him on the way. In Matthew's final chapters (chaps 26–28), Israel's Shepherd is characterized – not so much by compassion – as by suffering and the ability to gather the scattered flock (26:31). Nevertheless, his presence among them continues on in the breaking of the bread and the alleviation of suffering.

Lastly, by using the attribute of compassion the implied author identifies Jesus as Israel's expected Shepherd without correlating him with the excessive messianic concepts of late Judaism.¹³ The implied author distances Jesus from the figure of a political messiah. □

¹³ See Young S. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd*, 95-172.